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Supposedly, paleontologists can figure out a dinosaur’s entire skeletal structure from a single toe bone. A similar feat lies at the core of this book: faint traces of a painted lower leg and foot resting on a jeweled footstool trigger the reconstruction of an elaborate court-scene, with at least two imperial thrones.

 Luxor (a.k.a. Weset, Thebes) lies on the east bank of the Nile about 400 miles from the Mediterranean. Its ancient temple was the southern terminus of an elaborate procession during the Opet Festival: near the beginning of the Nile’s annual flood, priests and cultic attendants, elite guard units, musicians, and dancers would escort (sometimes by water, sometimes overland) the pharaoh and statues of the primary divine triad of Upper Egypt (Amon-Re, Mut, and Khonsu) from the giant religious complex at Karnak to the smaller river-side temple. There the ceremonial barques carrying images of the gods would rest in their shrines, while the Lord of the Two Lands renewed his regal energy in a ritual within the columned inner chamber.

 The original portion of the temple was built in the fourteenth century BCE by Amenhotep III; a century later Rameses II added a massive northern courtyard, with obelisks and colossal statues in front of its pylons. About 300 CE, when Roman legionaries converted the temple into a fortified camp, the former Chamber of the Divine King became the Imperial Cult Chamber, an area dedicated to the deified Diocletian and the three other members of the ruling Tetrarchy. Ancient columns were removed and a raised apse closed off the back doorway; coats of plaster covered the original pharaonic reliefs so Roman artists could paint large scale frescoes on the new surface. These murals feature what seems to have been a three-wall procession, with, perhaps, a pair of court assemblies on the south wall on either side of the focal niche. In the apse are four greater-than-life-size portraits of the co-emperors (one figure was later deliberately abraded).

 When antiquarians and tourists first visited the temple in the early nineteenth century, this chamber and apse were interpreted as a Christian church and the distorted figures in the wall paintings seen as martyrs and saints. After the initial removal of many generations of squatter-shacks, debris, and silt from that section
of the temple, in early 1856 the pioneering English Egyptologist, John Gardner Wilkinson, painted a series of watercolors clearly recording what survived of the authentic Roman military frescoes. These paintings remained unknown until rediscovered and explained by Ugo Monneret de Villard in 1953; his analysis demolished the myth of a decorated Christian chapel. In 1979 Johannes Deckers published the results of his archaeological work at the site, concluding with a series of detailed drawings of the spotty remnants of the murals and a hypothetical reconstruction of the focal south wall.

Between 2005 and 2008 the American Research Center in Egypt, funded by USAID, sponsored a thorough—and meticulously scientific—cleaning and stabilization of the remnants of the frescoes in the Imperial Cult Chamber. This book, sumptuously produced, magnificently illustrated, compellingly written, is ARCE’s and Yale University Press’s long-awaited result and review of that undertaking.

The contributors to this volume cover every aspect of the complex history of the site and the interpretation of its unique wall paintings. Giovanni Ruffini (Fairfield) opens with a reassessment of the economic and religious vitality at Luxor in the late third century. His take is more up-beat than the usual view, but there is no evidence of priestly repair of the temple during Roman era or new documents that relate to the Amun cult. Then Susanna McFadden (Fordham) stresses the significance of “memory politics” in the Roman co-option of the ritual and regal status of the temple. In Chapter 3 James Heidel and Raymond Johnson, both of the Oriental Institute’s Chicago House in Luxor, present their conjectures (in amazingly clear drawings on pages 48-51) on the Diocletianic architectural modifications of the temple within and leading into the Imperial Cult Chamber. Most intriguing are their suggestions of a segmented pediment over the canopy in front of the apse and a four-columned classical portico with a pediment (made of wood and plaster) as an addition to the façade of Amenhotep’s traditional hypostyle portico.

Next Michael Jones (ARCE staff) reviews, with some great vintage photographs, the archaeological and conservation history of the temple. He emphasizes that the chamber itself had been cleared before Wilkinson’s last visit in 1856; misguided later projects resulted in additional destruction of the Roman-era plaster. (The modern doorway through the apse platform permits access to the southern-most shrine area.) Chapter 5 is devoted to a summary, with appropriate technical details, of the multi-year work of the three main Italian master conservationists. Their repeated, color-coded drawings graphically demonstrate the disastrous extent of the erosion of the plaster.

McFadden’s final two chapters concentrate on the essential art-historical di-
dimensions of the frescoes. With a bare minimum of specialized jargon she skillfully reviews the evidence of the conserved fragments, supported by Wilkinson’s watercolors and Deckers’s reconstruction, and concludes that the murals are a complete imperial Roman program: ceremonial procession (perhaps an *adventus*) and a triptych south wall with a central apse and perhaps two flanking tetrarchic throne-scenes. The final section underscores her thesis that the Roman re-use of the inner sanctum of the Luxor Temple was a deliberate linkage, for the glorification of the regime and the unenthusiastic edification of the provincials, to the immemorial divine energy of the ancient site.

An appendix reproduces in full-color all Wilkinson’s watercolors, with a final page zeroing in on the penciled notes that he added to some of them.

I have a single, minor quibble about this absolutely first-class volume. In my opening paragraph I mentioned the “faint traces” of a leg. Wilkinson’s panoramic watercolor fails to include this key element of the fresco, but the definitive fragment certainly does appear in current photographs of the upper southeast wall (see close-up detail on page 120). Deckers also saw this piece of the fresco during his late-1970s investigation of the site. The (imperial) leg, foot, and footstool are the keys to his re-creation of a hypothetical throne scene (123). McFadden, relying on verbal parallels from Latin panegyrics, similar themes on contemporary monuments and medals, a drawing of Constantius II, and the silver *Missorium* of Theodosius I (148), is convinced that Deckers’s hypothesis is right on the mark. Others may be a bit more skeptical about the expansive and explicit detail of his reconstruction – especially those art historians who wrangle over the “Emperor Mystique.” I mention this controversy only because the Luxor Temple tetrarchic murals are bound to be cited as a “missing link” between late Imperial art and early Christian apse mosaics (like that in Rome’s Santa Pudenziana). I can easily understand why any reasonably prudent scholar would wish to avoid this topic, but it is probably worth a few “advance-warning” paragraphs.

Finally, in a footnote (175 n. 19) McFadden mentions, with valid caveats, Dmitry A. Karelin’s multicolor reconstructions of the Cult Chamber and its military wall paintings. This work, however, merits a Google; then, for para-academic kicks, check out some of his slick presentations.

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